

Virginia Gardening

with Jim May

Sponsored by the Virginia Green Industry Council

February 2007

It's a good time of year for indoor gardening

Usually in this column, I talk about outdoor gardening, mostly because I'd rather be outside working in my yard, pruning my trees and shrubs, planting perennials and picking tomatoes. This time of year, however, that's just not possible and today I want to focus on a large, important and many times misunderstood group of plants, houseplants.

To understand houseplants and how to keep them alive and thriving, we need only look at the requirements of outdoor plants, namely, sunlight, temperature, soil, water and nutrients.

Another very important thing to consider is that a houseplant's roots are confined to a container and have no place to go. This fact alone makes houseplants completely dependent on us for survival and increases the importance of the type of container in which we grow them.

Pots and containers for houseplants come in all shapes, sizes and types of materials. Everyone seems to have a preference for one type or another; some will use only clay pots, others plastic, others prefer glazed pots. Each type has its own characteristics, including good and bad points.

Clay pots are really hard to beat for houseplants. They range in size from 2 inches to 18 or more inches in diameter and can be purchased with saucers to fit underneath. Before you place a plant in a clay pot, soak the pot in water so it won't rob the soil and plant's roots of needed moisture. These pots are heavy enough to prevent tall plants tipping over. Sometimes they are too heavy, though and must be placed on wheels to move them around.

Before you recycle and reuse old clay pots, soak them in a solution of 1 part household bleach and 9 parts water to kill any residual disease organisms. You can also run them through the dishwasher. One last thing to remember about clay pots is that since they are porous, moisture will seep through them, damaging carpet and floors. Place a plastic saucer under them.

Glazed pots and bonsai trays are very popular and readily available in garden centers. These decorative containers sometimes come with no hole in the bottom, however. In this case, simply grow the plant in a plastic or clay pot smaller than the glazed one and slip it inside. Use florist's moss or small stones to hide the edge.

Plastic pots are cheap, lightweight and recyclable. One word of caution: if you're accustomed to clay pots and switch to plastic or glazed, take care not to

over water your plants. Since clay pots are porous, you need to water slightly more often. Plastic and glazed pots will hold water longer.

Light is always an issue for houseplants. All plants require it, some more than others. Photosynthesis, the process by which plants grow, is triggered by light. There are four basic light categories for houseplants:

- Sunny areas receive at least five hours of direct sunlight in the winter. This is usually a southeast, south, or southwest-facing window.
- Semi-sunny areas receive two to five hours of sunlight daily. This is usually an east or west-facing window.
- Semi-shady areas have bright, open light, but no direct sunlight.
- Shady areas receive no sunlight, but just enough light to cast a shadow.

Learn about a plant's light requirements before you purchase it. Choose plants that will grow in the light you can provide them. If you have south facing windows, choose plants that will tolerate high light. Don't fry your ferns in a sunny window. If you have only shady areas, choose low-light plants or supplement with artificial lights. When plants get leggy or are reaching toward a window, that is an indication they need more light. There are many good plant lights on the market today. Set them on a timer for that special specimen plant and put the light away when company arrives.

The air in our homes has a dramatic effect on plants also. In their native tropics, plants thrive in warm, humid conditions. In our homes the air is usually drier and temperatures can fluctuate widely. Grouping plants is one way to increase humidity. Placing plants on a tray filled with moist vermiculite or pebbles is another.

Most plants will grow in a temperature range of 65 to 75 degrees F. A few degrees above or below this is usually fine; however, some tropical plants suffer below 60 degrees. In the winter a cold window can be damaging for even the hardiest plants. Drafts of hot or cold air can also damage plants.

Improper watering kills more houseplants than all other causes combined. Don't simply water on a schedule. Group plants by their light requirements as well as their water needs. For example, if you have two groups of plants, one that needs water only every 10 days and the other that needs water every 4 days, don't group them together and don't water them at the same time. One or both of the groups will suffer from weekly watering.

In future columns I will focus on different types of plants, repotting houseplants and fertilizer requirements. Happy indoor gardening.

Virginia Gardening with Jim May is brought to you by the Virginia Green Industry Council and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.